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READING POETRY IS CREATIVE TOO.

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A DISCUSSION OF THE PURPOSES AND PROBLEMS OF TEACHING POETRY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IS PRESENTED. TEACHING TECHNIQUES ARE SUGGESTED. SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS ARE GIVEN FOR PRESENTING "FOG," "THE HIGHWAYMAN," AND "THE BELLS." THIS ARTICLE APPEARS IN "JOURNAL OF READING," VOLUME 10, APRIL 1967. (RH)

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## Reading Poetry Is Creative Too

HOWARD B. GOODRICH

GIVEN THE HOST of seemingly reluctant poetry students in our English classes, the effective teaching of poetry sometimes appears almost impossible. It becomes even more difficult when we realize that the personality and temperament of Americans tend to make them read to get "useful" facts as quickly as possible (notice the rage for speed-reading courses) or to escape from the exacting and mundane realities of existence. In addition, spending an hour or more worrying at a 20-line poem is terribly inefficient when the same amount of leisure time could be spent passing over 40 pages of a thrilling novel. Our whole culture appears deliberately to avoid reading that needs as much time, concentration, creativity, and personal involvement as poetry.

Then, too, one of the unfortunate stereotypes our students have is that of the poet: a thin, dreamy Poe, Shelley, or Keats, who is a special type of slightly crazy human being. Since most students cannot identify with someone like this and since many of the poems they read are about beauty and nature and love and other ethereal things, they reject poetry as something from a world of which they are not a part.

Yet almost all human beings are in reality poets and react to many of the situations in their lives as poets. Therefore, all we need do is tap the poetry-making quality in each of our students to make reading poetry interesting and meaningful to them.

There is probably no single definition of poetry that will eliminate argument among the members in a class about what is and what is not a poem. Perhaps the best way to define poetry is to keep the student in mind—what differences will it make to him if something is poetry or if something is prose. Since he will first be reading poetry and then be writing it (if he does so at all), the definition which we should formulate should be stated in terms of these activities. If we analyze the differences between reading a science textbook, for instance, and reading a poem, we can conclude, perhaps, that a poem is a piece of writing depending for its full effect on the process of image-making engaged in by the reader as he reads the poem and thinks about it. Thus, imagery is the essence of poetry; and the reading, understanding, and appreciation of poetry depend upon the effectiveness with which

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the reader can build his own images and, in effect, create his own poem.

Most human beings do have this image-making power, although a few may be much better than others at expressing themselves. Suppose, for instance, that one day a junior high teacher puts this sentence on the board to illustrate an adjective clause: "The little white puppy, which had been severely injured by a car, was feeling better." Suppose that just as the class read it, one of the girls, who is usually vivacious and alert, becomes very quiet and disturbed. Investigation later may show that the girl's own dog had been hit and killed by a car in front of her eyes several days before. This explains her unusual behavior. But what it really shows is that the girl has not read the teacher's sentence. She has read his words and turned their basic picture into a kind of poetic fragment which had great meaning for her: she built an image around the sentence the teacher used by reacting to it in terms of her own experience.

The initial problem in helping students to read and understand poetry is to have them understand what an image is. The teacher can use the example above to show that words sometimes have meanings for some people that they do not have for others and that the same words have different meanings for the same person at different times. Using this understanding, he can develop the definition of an image: *a specific picture around which we cluster all that this picture can relate to within us.* The process of reading poetry, then, becomes that of helping the poet create within us the images that best express what he wants to tell us; we must allow him to pique the poet in us, so to speak.

As further explanation the teacher can use the following:

**$H_2O$ water moonlit lake "The fog comes on little cat feet.**

**It sits looking over harbor and city on silent haunches and then moves on." (Carl Sandburg, "Fog.")**

In this progression we go first from a scientific symbol, which has the least power to produce images (the scientist, after all, is not working with individual reactions to this substance but to the pure substance itself) to the word "water," which has more image-making power. It can be a good shower after strenuous exercise, or a cold drink to a thirsty man. In effect, *water* begins to stand for experiences associated with the use of water, rather than with just the substance itself. The moonlit lake has more image power yet, since it implies a boy and girl and love, all

the romantic triteness one can imagine. The last one, of course, is a poem; that is, the image created by the being Sandburg when he saw water in a particular form. Without using words like simile or metaphor, the teacher can show his students that poetry implies the creation of something larger and more meaningful than the words, facts, or pictures presented by the words themselves.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| $CO_2$ | carbon dioxide | coke | "It tastes like your tongue's asleep." |

Here once again the students can see that the pure material to which the scientist refers by his use of symbols is far different from the unscientific but accurate reaction of the human to the material.

Additional techniques and examples can be used for students who seem to need it. Mentioning the words "little sister" often gets a reaction from the class, and asking for elaborate explanations about their reactions will show the students that the denotative meaning of little sister is far different from the enlarged connotation, the image, which many of the students give to the words. The same can be done with other words like blood, snake, ghoul, and by Rorschach-type pictures, or by anything which will force the students to react and create.

Once students have understood imagery and its creation, the teacher must then help and encourage them to form images as they read poems. First, perhaps, they should realize that there are two poems in addition to the one written on the paper: the one in the mind of the poet and the one in the mind of the reader, both of which are different from each other and from the written poem itself. Next, they must realize that none of the three is the *true* poem; although all three may not be of equal depth and intensity, all are valid poems.

In such an approach, however, one can readily see a danger: the students will believe that reading poetry is unrestrained imagination. This, of course, is not true. Reading a poem is discovering and building—a reader tries to discover the poem in the mind of the poet by building a poem in his own mind, using the poem on the paper as a guide. Therefore, the student must build images that have meaning within the confines of the poem, not those that are the products of undirected and uncontrolled free association. However, given the natural didactic tendency of teachers, the greatest danger will probably lie in too much direction and "help" rather than a lack of it. The teacher must be very careful not to give his own images to his students before

they have a chance to form their own, or to restrict their creativity and imagination by the limits of his own or the author's.

The first and most important job of the teacher, then, is to stimulate the poet that lies in each student. The second job is to help the student use techniques which will enable him to take the written poem and his own imagination and discover the author's poem or, to put it another way, to form his own version of the poet's poem. Such help cannot be provided merely by assigning poems for students to read, motivating them, directing their reading, having the class discuss them, and having students write interpretations. The teacher must teach the students techniques.

In teaching "The Highwayman," for example, a good place to start is with the title. Asking the question "What is a highwayman?" does no more than prepare the students for a reading lesson. For the reading of poetry we must follow with others: "How do you picture a highwayman?" "Why did the poet use this title instead of a synonym? What then do we know about the poem already, and what attitude do we have toward the main character even before we start reading the poem?" With some classes, of course, it may be necessary to spoon-feed the idea that the poet has already started our image-making power working for him and for his main character. Other classes may see the "trickery" of the poet immediately.

After reading the poem aloud with as much histrionics and power as he can, the teacher can ask questions like the following: "Was the highwayman handsome? Prove it by pointing to specific places in the text. Was Bess beautiful? Prove it by pointing to specific places in the text. What kind of person was Tim? What pictures give us the best contrast between Tim and the highwayman? Why?"

During the discussion of each one of the questions the teacher must pin the students down and make them prove beyond any doubt that Bess was beautiful and the highwayman handsome. If the discussion is handled well, the students will be forced to admit that nowhere can they find direct proof and that they have inferred certain things because of the images they made, with help from Noyes. The teacher and the class should then explore the specific poetic help that Noyes provides: What is it that Noyes knew about human beings and language that enabled him to create these opinions in the readers without stating them? More sensitive classes will also be able to understand that this

indirect creation enhances poetic enjoyment. Direct statement ruins it.

Another point that can be utilized effectively is the position of Tim, who is really a good citizen in favor of law and order. The students, however, fail to see that Tim is a "good" man. He is their villain in his horse opera. A discussion about the actual activities of highwaymen and why such people would not ordinarily be considered model citizens will not lessen the appreciation of the poem, but will show the power of the image-making facility. Most readers consider the highwayman a hero when he is actually no more than a thug.

The end of the poem offers a further opportunity to discuss images and the uses to which poets put them. "The white road smoking behind him" is an excellent picture to use: "Why did the poet make the road white? Why does this color make the word *smoking* especially appropriate? Why did the poet use the word smoking, or what does the word *smoking* bring to your mind that we might apply to the poem to get a better meaning?"

It is at this point that the class itself can see that some suggestions for the word *smoking* may be inapplicable and thus recognize that there is a certain framework within which the images engendered by the poem must fit.

For another image, the teacher can use the pharase "down like a dog in the highway:" "What does the word *highway* bring to mind?" When the students see that highway can call to their minds the highwayman himself, as he was at the beginning of the poem, the next question becomes, "What does the word 'dog' bring to your mind?" The teacher will get several answers which are appropriate, but probably no student will think of Tim, who was "dumb as a dog." To help the students suddenly seize this phrase and catch the cohesion that it gives to the poem, the teacher can talk about using the poem itself as a source of images. An effective technique is to compare their searching with that of a ship's radar scope which goes round the dial and occasionally picks up a blip. Using the word "dog" as their center, the students can send their image-making radars around the poem to pick up blips that have meaning to them for the word *dog* in this poem. When they pick up the reference to Tim, many of the brighter students will see the connection, but others may not. The teacher can then clinch the point by asking, "Who caused the highwayman's death?"

Presenting a poem in this way gives a logical purpose to the pictures and other poetic tricks a writer uses. Instead of asking

the students to react to the "beauty of the language" or the "beauty of the descriptions," the teacher is asking the students to see how a poet carefully influences a reader in ways that prose writers cannot do.

Presenting a poem in this way also gives students a method for attacking any poem that they read and for analyzing aspects of poetry that the teacher may wish to bring up later. Poets use, for instance, the appearance of words to create images. In "Buffalo Bill," ee cummings writes that Bill used to be able to break "onetwothreefourfivepigeonsjustlikethat." Most classes can readily understand why cummings wrote the words together. Using other poems by cummings and by other experimental writers, a teacher can find more subtle places where poets have used the appearance of the words or the poem to heighten the effect, that is, to help the reader create the images he needs to appreciate and understand the poem more fully.

Edgar Allen Poe's "The Bells" is, of course, a fine poem for the obvious use of sound to create poetic effect and imagery. Starting the lesson by a discussion of onomatopoeia (using the technical term or not as he sees fit), the teacher can have the class understand the close relationship we often find between the sound of a word and its meaning by using words like *roar, rumble, click.* Discussing words like *groan* and *whee* can show students that some vowel sounds are heavy and some are light and that people inadvertently use light sounds for pleasure (a high-pitched eeeeeeee on a roller coaster) and heavy sounds for unhappiness and misery (a low mournful ooooooo for pain).

Turning to the poem itself, the teacher can stress the importance of allowing the sounds of the words, in addition to and sometimes in spite of their meanings, to help build images. The meanings of words may be of secondary importance in Poe's selection of some words. After reading the poem aloud, an absolute necessity for studying poetry, the teacher can discuss the kinds of words that Poe uses in each of his stanzas and perhaps the contributions that the sounds make to the images the students have formed. Then, he can have each student pick out and justify the one word in each stanza which best represents to the student the sound and effect of the bell presented in the stanza with the added stipulation that the word selected must not have a sound as its meaning. The assignment is not supposed to test his understanding of onomatopoeia; it should sharpen his understanding of a principle more basic, the ability that

sounds themselves have to express thoughts and create images regardless of the meaning of the word in which they appear.

Certainly there is more to the teaching of poetry than using a few poems effectively in two or three lessons. Each poet usually presents some new facet of human experience in writing his poetry; one cannot jump immediately from "The Bells" to "The Hollow Men." But if students can understand the basic poetic process and how reading poetry differs from reading prose, they will be able gradually to develop a method for analyzing and appreciating poetry as they mature and read more. If the teacher can teach the students what images are and can stimulate the students to react imaginatively and intelligently to poetry, he will have fulfilled his purpose as a poetry teacher. He can hope that all students will some day react the way this student reacted:

Student: Are you really going to discuss "The Hollow Men" tomorrow?
Teacher: Yes. Why?
Student: I'm not coming to class, then.
Teacher: Why not. Don't you like the poem?
Student: Yes, that's the trouble. I do like it; but I haven't figured out what I think about it yet, and I don't want you or anybody else telling me what I'm supposed to think about it.


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